



Glimmerglass' little *Aida* makes a huge impact

You won't see plumed horses, a procession of camels, or a hundred supernumeraries as standard bearers parading across the Glimmerglass stage. In fact, you have to step outside the Alice Busch Opera Theater to see any elephants at all, the animal most commonly associated with *Aida*, Verdi's greatest grand opera. Two brown pachyderms, a mother and a baby, made from grapevine boughs, mark the southernmost entrance to the Festival grounds this season. If you must have elephants in your *Aida*, you'd best enjoy this pair before settling into your seat to watch the show.

With a seating capacity of 945, the Glimmerglass house is actually similar in size to the venue in which *Aida* premiered in Cairo back in 1871. Over time, *Aida* came to include huge, over-the-top spectacle, especially during the "Triumphal March." But don't head to Cooperstown expecting to see Verona or the Met. Do expect a big sing and a big play, however. In terms of sound and fury, the Glimmerglass show, directed by Artistic and General Director Francesca Zambello, is huge. Huge voices, a huge orchestral sound, and huge special effects, right from the get-go, when the Egyptian palace is strafed by attack planes.

That's because this *Aida* is set in the present day, when a Middle-Eastern city under siege is as common scene on the nightly news as politicians stumping for election. Put the Egyptian soldiers in combat fatigues but throw in some exotic, traditional Egyptian robes, and you have a visually compelling mash-up of Old World and New World, of traditional and postmodern, of forbidden love and consuming passions that leave nothing but scorched earth and spent souls in their wake.

Following the dramatic attack on the King of Egypt, army officer Radamès (sung by Noah Stewart) breaks out into a huge tenor aria with a voice so big, one wonders whether he'll have anything left for Act IV. In short order, he is joined by a stage full of big singers, or more aptly, young singers with bountiful lung power, waving colorful flags with ferocity. With gaping holes of bombed-out sections of the palace as their backdrop, these young and fervent flag-bearers reminded me of the revolutionaries storming the barricades in the streets of Paris, à la *Aida* meets *Les Misérables*.

Soprano Michelle Johnson sang the title role—the foreign princess who is herself enslaved to a princess. I've seen Johnson in numerous [other roles](#) at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. She is known for her technique and phrasing, her range and breath control. But even Johnson's nuanced voice was huge for this show, as powerful and dramatic as I'd ever heard it, and surprisingly, ideally suited to this role.

Her scene with mezzo-soprano Daveda Karanas as the spoiled, scheming Amneris was a highlight of the first half—both performers hitting their stride by that point in the opera and playing beautifully off one another.

To be sure, the first half is a frenetic spectacle and sound, but there is also sensuality, provided to winning effect by the score of chamber maids in pink chiffon robes. The combined first two acts comprise a musical and visual feast, and Egyptian conductor Nader Abbassi drives the orchestra to sound both warlike and scheming as the opera's central characters rally to battle or cavort in the boudoir.

While I liked Johnson's performance better in the first half, both Stewart and Karanas turned in a stronger second half. Perhaps that's because most of the major characters are forced to come to terms with their choices in Acts III and IV, and that makes for compelling theater: Aida must use trickery to gain information from Radamès; Amonasro, expertly sung by bass-baritone Eric Owens, must confess his identity and die with dignity; Radamès must love Aida though it will kill him; and Amneris can't have what she wants the most, despite the fact that her nation has been victorious and she now has untold riches and wealth.

The second half is more textured and features the most poignant scenes and arias. That Aida would rather die alongside Radamès than live without him is tragically heroic and deeply stirring, a scene which Johnson and Stewart played to perfection.

Aida may be as relevant a commentary on conflict today as during the time it was written—it's a social commentary that becomes plainly obvious. That is, once you take the elephants out of your eye.

Submitted by Gale Martin, operatoonity.com on 7th August 2012